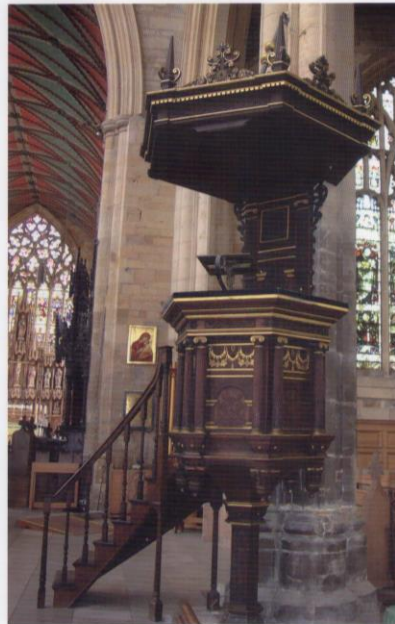


A transcription of a book review by David Lambourne in *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology*, Volume 47 2012, (Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology) (Scheduled to be published 2014).

Rosenmeier, Jesper. *'Spiritual Concupiscence': John Cotton's English Years 1584-1633*. Richard Kay Publications, 2012, 378pp. ISBN 9781902882116 pbk. £35-00, ISBN 9781902882024 hbk.£50-00

*'Spiritual Concupiscence':
John Cotton's English Years, 1584-1633*



by Jesper Rosenmeier, Fletcher Professor of English Emeritus

The author received his PhD from Harvard University in 1966 for his thesis on John Cotton, the famous seventeenth century puritan vicar of Boston who went on to become a notable figure in the new Boston settlement in New England. He has been immersed in a study of the subject of his dissertation and generally in the 'puritan vineyard', as he describes it, ever since, and this remarkable publication represents the culmination of his efforts.

Cotton was born in Derby in 1584 and, after attending Derby Grammar School, was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge at the early age of 14. Rosenmeir explains how, whilst at Trinity and then later at Emmanuel College, Cotton encountered some of the greatest theological minds of the time, such as William Perkins, Laurence Chaderton and Richard Sibbes, and thereby developed and fashioned his own puritan position, a position which to some extent remained fluid both through his period as vicar of St. Botolph's and then in New England. At Emmanuel, life was very much puritan based, as the author for example records, 'teachers, fellows, and students came dressed for service in their everyday clothes, emulating the first disciples who surely did not fish or spread the good news dressed in the surplice'.

Readers of this scholarly work will be fascinated to find that Lincolnshire's Boston, which has for so long been commonly regarded as a puritan town in this era, was also a very divided town with considerable turmoil within it. Even Cotton's appointment as vicar in 1612 at the age of 27 was not without controversy. The Boston Corporation, which owned the advowson, nominated a replacement for the puritan incumbent, Thomas Woole, who had moved to Skirbeck, only for this new appointee to almost immediately stand down. The divided Corporation needed two separate votes to select Cotton and in both of which there was an equal division between those present and the chairman's casting vote in favour of him. Rosenmeier goes on to explore the fierce factionalism which existed within the town throughout Cotton's ministry, and to establish that this,

despite Cotton's appeals to all of his parishioners, even extended to within the congregation at St. Botolph's itself.

The author also explores how the town's tribulations even received national attention with the possibility being raised that the Corporation was incapable of running its own affairs when a zealous puritan cut the crosses off from the official mayoral maces. These maces visibly represented King James's presence and authority. Leading puritan members of the Corporation came under suspicion and the Privy Council ordered an enquiry. Unsurprisingly, the enquiry led by two leading citizens including the wealthy and influential Sir Anthony Irby, MP for Boston and Sheriff of Lincolnshire and himself a prominent puritan, failed to find the culprit. Further investigations proved no more successful. The Privy Council's real target, though he was not directly implicated, was, however, according to Rosenmeier, undoubtedly John Cotton.

Cotton's ministry was, as the author comprehensively demonstrates, full of controversy. He was often in difficulties with the church authorities through his congregational tendencies and his abandonment of the customary rituals. He refused to wear the surplice, to kneel at Communion, to stand at the Creed or to use the cross at baptism and the ring in marriage. By the early 1630s his position at St. Botolph's had become virtually untenable and the High Commission prosecuted him, along with others, for his nonconformity. Before proceedings had been completed, though, Cotton and other accused Boston puritans were, as Rosenmeier shows, safely in New England where they joined those from the town who had recently gone before them.

All in all Rosenmeier has produced a remarkable account in which there is much to fascinate the reader as, for instance, he so ably does with the attention he gives to the importance and use of mnemonics in aiding memory in the early seventeenth century and to the comparatively different role of the written and printed word from today.

This monumental study is especially important for all those with a scholarly concern for the puritan world and its

theological, social and political struggles, but it will also be of interest to the more general reader who is willing to be challenged in order to deepen his or her understanding of the difficult and tumultuous times which shaped Boston, Lincolnshire and beyond.

David Lambourne, Boston